



ADVENT DEVOTIONAL 2021

HOPE PEACE
JOY LOVE

The First Presbyterian Church
in the City of New York

ADVENT DEVOTIONAL 2021

Welcome to the Season of Advent!

You are invited to journey with the church through a weekly devotional series created for our whole church family. As you work through each devotional, you are first invited to light the candles on your Advent wreath (if you have one), or use the paper Advent wreath found in our weekly newsletter to color in every week, and read the suggested lectionary reading for the week. The lectionary is the list of Scripture passages that many churches use to decide what will be preached on every week. The lectionary allows us to cycle through the Bible so we can read and learn as much as we can every year.

After you read the meditation and pray, you are invited to do a suggested activity for the week. Each of these ideas are suggested so that you might find a moment in your week to celebrate the meaning of the Advent season as we celebrate the hope, peace, joy, and love which we are blessed with this season.

You are also invited to read another Scripture reading to take a moment to pause during the middle of the week. A brief prayer is also offered for you to read and meditate on along with the reading. As you work through the devotional throughout Advent, we invite you to join us in all our programs as well as on our social media. We are so excited to celebrate this season together!

Audrey Webber



HOPE

Luke 21:25-36

Fifty-two minutes is approximately how long it takes for me to travel by train from home to Penn Station, New York. Most of the time this isn't true. The train is a few or many minutes late. *Never* early. I've joked that I live and die by the train. I know exactly which train to catch that punctually delivers me to church. My journey home is timed down to the minute of when my stride should hit the sidewalk. After all, the train waits for no one, so neither can I.

Somewhere in between home and church, on the Jersey side of the Hudson, the train glides through a swath of marshland, appearing to float right over the reeds and shallow waters before plunging into the dark tunnel. I've gotten into the habit of watching these marsh waters closely. With hopeful anticipation, I almost always spot an Anhinga bird. Its distinctive, long, slender neck and sharp pointed beak outstretched gracefully from the water sends ripples to cut the glassy surface.

While the train chugs past, they poke their heads from the water to catch a breath, watch, then down again they dive. A backdrop of Manhattan's skyline and the shipping ports of Newark behind them, they greet me every morning before diving out of sight, the ripples like their tiny voices echoing 'hello!' They are a tiny piece of wonder hidden by the surrounding metropolis. They are my commuter's hope: the resilience of nature surviving the carnage of over development around them.

As I read today's scripture I am reminded of these watchful birds. Amidst chaos, they are alert as the earth around them rumbles to its core from trains, industry, pollution. They understand there's little they can depend on from their ever-changing habitat. With all that *could* grab their attention, they remain steadfast, retreating beneath the surface to nourish and sustain themselves, tuning everything else out.

It feels like we are fast approaching a dark tunnel of our own. The earth is indeed trembling, a slow and steady rumble that seems to be growing out of control the further we venture down the track, coming to a screeching halt only for the manger, the tiny, untouched centerpiece of our Advent journey—hope itself appearing in its most vulnerable form. We can only try to be more or less on time, boarding this train to witness the ride together.

Hannah Faye Allred

Activity

Go Bird Watching! This week, walk to central park and see if you can spot the following feathered friends: Owls, Black-Capped Chickadees, or even a Bald Eagle. There are opportunities to go birdwatching all year long, even in Winter! But as you're trekking through the leaves and snow, think about this crazy thing called hope. Take note of the anticipation and hopefulness you feel to catch a glimpse of a feathered friend. As we are approaching advent, let's all keep our eyes peeled for hope to arrive in the strangest and most vulnerable form in the manger.

Midweek Reading and Prayer

Psalm 25:1-10

God, fill us with hope. Let us see it. Like we see our breath when it's cold, the way it swirls and builds then evaporates into the air. Surround us with the presence and comfort, excitement and anticipation of hope during this season, that we may breathe it in and out as we go about our days and as our days turn to night. Keep us brimming with hope to face each new day. We ask all these things in the name of the one who is to come, our hope itself, Jesus the Christ, Amen.



PEACE

Luke 3:1-16

The Kingdom of Heaven is like... an IKEA instruction booklet. Ok. It's not. But sometimes I wish it were. Let me explain.

A few years ago, I bought an armoire from Ikea. As infuriating as it was to put it together (I am not a handy person by any means), having the instruction booklet was a blessing. And the level of expertise needed to put it together apparently is pretty low. No words. Stick figures and rudimentary drawings will do. They even show you what it's supposed to look like, provide the tools needed and tell you when you should be asking for assistance in carrying. In theory, you can't go wrong.

If only the kingdom of God were like that. Yes, love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and your neighbor as yourself is pretty straightforward. It's the specifics that get me. What do I do with my neighbor who lives on the street corner as I walk past him every day? How do I use my voice, resources, and life to change discrimination practices in this world? How do I balance my call to serve with the need for rest? How do I spend and give away money in a way that honors God? In short, how do I do what I am called to do as a follower of Jesus Christ?

This is why I love this text in the Gospel of Luke. The crowds come to John the Baptist in the wilderness and are cut to the heart with his preaching. In turn, they ask the question, "What should we do?" Did you notice that this is the question in everyone's heart? They all ask this. The crowds, the tax collectors and the soldiers all want to know exactly what to do in order to honor God and bear fruits worthy of repentance (verse 8). The beauty of this passage, is that John answers their questions. "Have a coat drive. Feed the hungry. Be honorable and have integrity in your financial transactions. Treat others with dignity." All are very specific instructions which have to deal with justice and love for neighbor.

I wish it were that easy for us. My experience of discipleship is different. Wouldn't it be great if we prayed "Lord, what should I do?" and an IKEA-like instruction booklet would fall from heaven? I wish. But the faith is rarely like this. We rarely get burning bushes, booming voices from heaven, or sermons from fiery camel-hair-wearing-locust-munching prophets telling us how to live.

Instead, we get love. Love of God, and love of neighbor. They are not incredibly specific. These however are really good markers to guide our Advent journeys.

Greg Stovell

Activity

Take a rubber band and put it on your wrist. Live with it for a few days. Regardless of where you are or in what situation you find yourself, every time you see it (or every time it gets in the way) pause for a moment and say this quick prayer, "Lord, what should I do?"

See what God says. God's answer may surprise you.

Midweek Reading and Prayer

Luke 1:68-79

God, our guide and our protector, open our minds and souls and hearts,
that we may be inclined to hear the gentle direction of your spirit in our lives.
Help us follow you as you lead us serving you in this world you love. Amen.



JOY Luke 3:7-18

It is really hard for me not to think of my family and people I care about when reading this passage along with this week being the third Sunday of Advent being the week of “joy” alongside this passage. You see I can sometimes get pretty nostalgic about Scripture and being Advent with Christmas upon us I am doubly nostalgic! You see - I often love when I can associate my favorite passages of Scripture with something that happened in my life. For example, I will never forget reading the John 1 text during our 5 p.m. family Christmas Eve service on light and having our confirmands along with the whole congregation flashing flashlights every time we said the word “light.” I will never be able to read that text again without thinking of that evening.

For our passage today, we find John the Baptist proclaiming that there is this Messiah who is to come, and what I like to think is a sort of joyous celebration as he splashes in the water and proclaims that he is not even “worthy to untie the thong of his sandals!” Whenever I read this verse, I cannot help but remember the movie and Broadway show *Godspell*. I remember so vividly being in high school and duetting multiple *Godspell* songs and singing together *Prepare Ye* and yelling out to each other this very verse. In conjunction with this and the joy not only in this Scripture passage through John’s tone, I also cannot help but think of my mom whose name happens to be Joy. She herself truly does embody joy despite the fact that she claims she does not always. I’ve never met another person who does so quite the same way.

I think for many of us, our memories do crop up more this time of year, and I am grateful that we have each other to lift up the joyful memories just as John lifts up the Messiah ahead of us. Because indeed what is more joyful than knowing that something so wonderful is to come? Although there are some family members and friends who are no longer here with whom we share such joyful memories, these dear people live on through us and through the joy which John the Baptist shared which he also shared with those around him before he too was killed. It is this joy that Jesus is coming that will hold us up and help us join together as one community of joy and celebrate that *our* Jesus is here.

Audrey Webber

Activity

This week, as we continue to celebrate this Advent season, I invite you to take a moment to lift up the people you care about both those who are here and those no longer with us. Find a piece of fabric and cut it into a circle or if you have an old blanket grab that. Find some permanent markers and write on either the circle piece of fabric or the old blanket the names of those who you deeply care about, and with whom you have shared previous Advent and Christmas seasons with before. If you choose to write these names on a circular piece of fabric, place it on the table where you eat so that you can see it over the remainder of the season. If you decide to write these names on a blanket, keep the blanket near the Christmas tree or wherever you will be most this Advent so that you can be reminded of these special people.

Pray over them and celebrate their memories this Advent season.

Midweek Reading and Prayer Isaiah 12:2-6

Dear God, Joy! That is what you are. Not only do you bring us joy in our lives, but we are so grateful that you also embody joy within us and within your Son, Jesus. God, we are not always ready to sing for joy as we are sometimes heavy with all our tasks, our grief, and our hurting world. We only wish that sometimes we could put it all aside and celebrate you and your son. It is hard for us, God, to do that consistently, and so we ask that you lift from us some of the weight which holds us down and give thanks for you and all of the beautiful things you have given us - the people who care for us, the places we love, and the church we can call home. Open our hearts that we might breathe in and breathe out the joy that can only come from you. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.



LOVE

Luke 1:39-55

Luke's story of Jesus begins with two ordinary women, two cousins, Elizabeth and Mary, both incredulous at what has happened to them. A barren elderly woman and a teenage virgin, both pregnant, find themselves chosen by God to bring good news to the world through their children who would become John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth. This is where the familiar story of Jesus' birth begins, in the story of these two women of little worldly means, and for them it is very personal. Where hope no longer seemed very plausible, Elizabeth who was advanced beyond childbearing years and Mary finding herself unmarried and pregnant, are overwhelmed with gratitude towards God for changing expected outcomes. The world is on its head. The proud are scattered, the powerful brought down from their thrones, the lowly lifted up, the hungry filled with good things, and the rich sent empty away. Mary's song of praise rejoices in her God, our God, who alone creates a future where there is no future. And a future that even Mary and Elizabeth cannot imagine, the future for us all, the future where even death no longer holds power, our future of an eternal life given to us by our God and revealed to us through the life and resurrection of this yet-unborn baby.

Mark Hostetter

Activity

Let's spread the love in this last week before Christmas! Although you have likely already sent all of your Christmas cards and messages to your family and friends, choose three people to whom you haven't sent messages. Pick three people who you haven't spoken with in a long while and send them a message. Wish them a merry Christmas, and remind them that they are so loved, and you are so grateful to have them in your life.

Midweek Reading and Prayer

Luke 1:46b-55

Almighty God, like Mary, we magnify your name, and our spirits rejoice in our Savior. For truly you lift up the lowly, fill the hungry with good things, and create a future for us where there is no future. In this Advent season, help us to keep our eyes open for the unexpected, our hearts open for those in need, and our souls hopeful for the light you provide in our darkness. All this we pray in the name of the lowly babe in the manger who fills our lives with joy, AMEN.



CHRISTMAS EVE

Luke 2:1-20

In those days, Augustus was Emperor of Rome. It was census time. Quirinus was governor of Syria. Bethlehem, the city of David, was busy with travelers. Whatever birth plan Mary might have had for her delivery, it was not meant to happen at home in Nazareth. In those days, there was a feeling of chaos, anxiety; it was time of great upheaval. Which sounds like the days we are living in, doesn't it?

It is hard to remember the beauty and love around us. Our plans evolve and change, then change again. We are reminded again and again of the fragility of our plans. It is easy amidst chaos to thrash and lament, to cry out. I'm sure traveling this late in her pregnancy, Mary had a few of these thoughts. I'm sure she missed her home, Elizabeth, the comfort foods, her own bed, the view of the sky from Nazareth.

In these days, we have our own journeys, our own things that we are giving birth to, our own laments. I always kind of wish the angels who stopped to greet the shepherds that night would have swung by Bethlehem and said a comforting word to Mary and Joseph. "Do not be afraid, for see—" Even though Mary already had an angel visit her, I'm sure a little reinforcement that she was where she needed to be would have helped.

But isn't that just like God? God widens the circle around Mary. The angels bring shepherds into the support system. The shepherds who were sleeping under the stars, having their own experience of those days. Those shepherds herd up their flocks and head to that manger to remind Mary that in those days, she was accompanied by community *and* by God. Isn't that a great message for us in these days? We don't just have support from God, we also have support from shepherds in our own lives, reminding us to look up at the stars and remember that we are not alone.

Barbara Davis

Activity

Go for a short walk after dark or spend some time by a window in your apartment with the lights off. What do you see? Where is there light? Don't be afraid, observe.

Prayer: God of the unexpected, keep our hearts and minds open to ways you cherish us. Help us watch for shepherds in our midst. Keep our hearts and minds open to hope and creativity you have put before us. Amen.

Christmas Reading and Prayer

John 1:1-14

Let us pray.

In the beginning, we were with you, God. In the longest nights of winter, we remember the light, we remember the beginning with you. We remember the spark of creativity, the order, the chaos, the way they were together and energizing each other. You are life. With you, we are accompanied by grace and truth. In this beginning we feel you again with us in ways we have forgotten, in ways we have not known before. Eternal One, whisper to us these new things. Whisper to us these old things. Through you, we are back at the beginning. Through you are made new by remembering. Embrace us this day in your love. Embrace us this day in your light. As you have always walked beside us, take our hand this day and walk with us. Like we did in the beginning, let us see the world with us with welcome hearts. Come into the world once again, God. Walk beside us; hear our joys and worries and let us hear your joys and worries. Create with us. Make your home among us, as you always have, since the beginning. Amen.



Advent Worship and Events at First Church

First Sunday of Advent

Sunday, November 28th at 11:00 a.m.

Advent Bible Study

Wednesdays in December at 12:30 p.m. - 1st, 8th, 15th

Advent Prayer Writing

Thursdays in December at 8:30 a.m. - 2nd, 9th, 16th, 23rd

Tartan Fair

Friday, December 3rd Beginning 4:00 p.m.

Saturday, December 4th 10:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.

Sunday, December 5th 1:00 p.m. - 3:00 p.m.

Second Sunday of Advent

Sunday, December 5th at 11:00 a.m.

Peace on Earth: A Vespers Service of Christmas

Sunday, December 5th at 4:00 p.m.

Young Adults Gathering

Tuesday, December 7th 6:30 p.m.

Family Christmas Party

Saturday, December 11th at 11:00 a.m.

Third Sunday of Advent

Sunday, December 12th at 11:00 a.m.

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Sunday, December 19th at 11:00 a.m.

Young Adult Gathering at Lillie's Bar

Sunday, December 19th at 2:30 p.m.

Candlelight Carol Service

Sunday, December 19th at 4:00 p.m.

Christmas Eve Services

Friday, December 24th at 12:00 p.m.

Friday, December 24th at 5:00 p.m.

Friday, December 24th at 11:00 p.m.

